Emergency resolution Nr. 6 adopted at the EPP Congress, Bucharest (Romania), 6th – 7th March 2024

"Child exposure to online content"

Acknowledging that:

- **Social media has made all kinds of online content more accessible, but this includes material which is unsuitable for children and potentially** dangerous. Disturbing content targeting children is easily available, as many platforms do not restrict access by age, or take measures to block dangerous content.

  The **average time** that children reported spending online daily in the EU Kids 2020 survey **had almost doubled** since 2010 (for example, from about 1 to 3 hours per day in Spain and from almost 2 to nearly 3 hours in Czechia).

- **Children's mental health and well-being must always be taken into consideration, but specially when discussing the impact of social media.** This is a complex area, which involves many different and interrelated risk manifestations. The evidence of negative impact on children's health and well-being is conclusive in several fields.

- **Children are frequently exposed to harmful content online, on different social media platforms such as cyberbullying, sexualised content, or violent images, content that promotes, among others, eating disorders and disinformation**. Harmful effects for children's development include potential increased aggression, early sexualisation, unhealthy eating habits, body image dissatisfaction and distorted values and attitudes.

- The increase in **child and adolescent suicide in Europe** is an alarming public health problem that requires a broad social review of the possible factors involved. **The increased use of screen-based technology is a main contributing factor**. Research published in the Preventive Medicine Journal indicates that participants with a daily screen time of four or more hours are more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety disorder. Moreover, each additional hour of screen time is associated with a 9% increase in the likelihood of self-reporting suicidal tendencies two years later.

- A European Parliament resolution of 5 July 2022 on mental health in the digital world of work pointed out **that 64 % of young people between 18 and 34 were at risk of depression in 2021**. This was primarily due to a lack of employment and financial and educational prospects, as well as loneliness and social isolation as a consequence of social media.

- Points out that the mental health of young people has got considerably worse during the pandemic, with young women and young people in marginalised situations more severely affected; regrets the fact that young people are not the target of investment in mental health research despite the manifest long-term benefits of early intervention; points out that 64 % of young people between 18 and 34 were at risk of depression in 2021 due to a lack of employment and financial and educational prospects as well as loneliness and social isolation; stresses that one of the best tools

to tackle mental health issues among young people is to provide them with meaningful prospects for good-quality education and employment; calls on the Commission to address the disruption in access to the labour market, which has put young people at greater risk of mental health disorders, and to take action to support young people in accessing and retaining adequate employment.

- **Eating disorders are on the rise worldwide; their prevalence more than doubled between 2000 and 2023 (3.4% to 7.8% of all people)**. Dissatisfaction with body weight or shape is the primary contributing factor of altered eating behaviours among adolescents and young adults. **There is evidence highlighting a positive association between prolonged media exposure and the development of eating disorders**. The study has found that about 52% of girls and 45% of boys opt for skipping meals, heavy exercise, and other behaviours associated with eating disorders. Of all participants, **about 75% of girls and 70% of boys have been found to have at least one social media account.**

- This legislative term has seen significant progress in legislative matters. The EPP is deeply committed to this issue and has led necessary initiatives such as the proposed Regulation laying down rules to prevent and combat **child sexual abuse**, which addresses the concern we expressed in Resolution No. 8 of the previous EPP Congress. This is a growing concern, and we see that it is being addressed from different parts of the world. In the US Senate, a hearing was organized on the matter where the lack of decisive measures by the platforms was denounced, and the rules set up to protect children were criticised for being ineffective. **Several public hearings have been convened on this matter by the EPP in order to delve deeper into the root causes and potential remedies**. For instance, the EPP Group in the European Parliament, in the context of the Digital Services Act, organised a Hearing called "We are losing our children! - VIOLENCE, ABUSE, RACISM - The disturbing daily life of school chat rooms".

- This situation is spiralling out of control; unless we take decisive action immediately, we risk **losing an entire generation**. The **European Commission recently opened a formal investigation against TikTok** for failing to take necessary measures to protect underage users and promote addictive behaviours.

- The proliferation of problematic practices on platforms like TikTok reflects a broader phenomenon in social media, with recurrent cases of inappropriate content, harassment, misinformation, and exploitation. While TikTok is not the sole culprit, its popularity and massive reach makes it a key actor in this issue. The lack of effective regulation and oversight has allowed these practices to persist and spread, necessitating firm measures by competent authorities to protect users, especially the most vulnerable. The increase of these practices underscores a pattern of negligent behaviour by social media platforms, highlighting the **urgent need** for stricter enforcement and **rigorous supervision** to ensure a **safe** and **healthy** online experience.

  The EPP Congress calls:

- **For supporting the full implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA), the European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) and AVMSD, which aims for age-appropriate digital services and contributes to ensuring that every child is safe, empowered and respected online**. All initiatives are led by the **EPP Group** in the European Parliament.

- For appropriate funding and human resources to the European Commission to ensure it has the means to enforce efficiently the DSA, especially in relation to the bigger social media platforms.

- On the European Commission and the EU Member States to investigate the continuing violations of the DSA as a matter of urgency, to identify the causes and also work more closely with one another in order to prosecute those who continue to post such content on the internet and to fine the responsible online services for their inaction in this regard; to **increase investments in the provision of support to victims of online child abuse or solicitation, including anonymous public reporting, and mental health and psychosocial services for victims and their families**; calls for training to be made available for professionals and officials, including law enforcement authorities, who deal with cases involving children, depending on their specific needs.

- On the providers of online-platforms to implement concrete measures ensuring age-appropriate content and swift action when illegal or inappropriate content appears online to which children have easy access.

- **For the implementation of several local measures**. Different governments in some Member States, such as the Government of the Community of Madrid (led by Partido Popular), have established a Commission to **analyse the effects of the use of mobile devices and screens, especially on young people and in the education field**. Its main objective will be to open the debate, involving all stakeholders, in order to carry out a diagnosis of the use and impact of technology by children and adolescents.

- For an increased implementation of strategies to include **the teaching of on-line safety and digital competences in schools**, encourage the use of the Internet across school subjects and in this respect support adequate teacher training.